

# Mental Health Handbook for Small Business Owners



# Starting the conversation

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Once you've recognised that someone in your team may be struggling and have genuine concerns for their wellbeing, it can be difficult to know how to begin the conversation.

Before you can look out for others, R U OK? suggest you need to look out for yourself. And that's OK. If you're not in the right headspace or you don't think you're the right person to have the conversation, try to think of someone else in their support network who could talk to them.

To help you decide whether you're ready to start a meaningful conversation, ask yourself:

## 1. Be ready

- Are you in a good headspace?
- Are you willing to genuinely listen?
- Can you give as much time as needed?

## 2. Be prepared

- Remember that you won't have all the answers (which is OK)
- If someone is talking about personal struggles this can be difficult and they might get emotional, embarrassed or upset

## 3. Pick your moment

- Have you chosen somewhere relatively private and informal?
- What time will be good for them to chat? Ideally try and put aside at least an hour so you have ample time to have a meaningful chat
- If they can't talk when you approach them, ask them for a better time to have a chat

Deciding where to have the conversation can be just as important as when and knowing what to say. In many small business environments, such as retail stores or building sites there isn't private meeting space available, so consider getting a coffee, going for a walk or grabbing a bite instead.

A change of environment, away from other staff members, can make someone feel more comfortable to open up and express themselves.



# ALEC – 4 Steps of an R U OK? Conversation

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## A

### 1. Ask R U OK?

- Be relaxed, friendly and concerned in your approach
- Help them open up by asking questions like “How are you going?” or “What’s been happening?”
- Mention specific things that have made you concerned for them, like “You seem less chatty than usual. How are you going?”

## IF

- If they don’t want to talk, don’t criticise them
- Tell them you’re still concerned about changes in their behaviour and you care about them
- Avoid a confrontation
- You could say: “Please call me if you ever want to chat” or “Is there someone else you’d rather talk to?”

## L

### 2. Listen with an open mind

- Take what they say seriously and don’t interrupt or rush the conversation
- Don’t judge their experiences or reactions but acknowledge that things seem tough for them
- If they need time to think, sit patiently with the silence
- Encourage them to explain: “How are you feeling about that?” or “How long have you felt that way?”
- Show that you’ve listened by repeating back what you’ve heard (in your own words) and ask if you have understood them properly

## E

### 3. Encourage action

Once they’ve opened up, encourage them to access support or to do something that might lighten the load.

You could ask:

- “What have you done in the past to manage similar situations?”
- “How would you like me to support you?”
- “What’s something you can do for yourself right now? Something that’s enjoyable or relaxing?”
- You could say: “When I was going through a difficult time, I tried this... You might find it useful too”
- If they’ve been feeling really down for more than 2 weeks, encourage them to see a trusted health professional. You could say, “It might be useful to link in with someone who can support you. I’m happy to assist you to find the right person to talk to”
- Be positive about the role of professionals in getting through tough times

## C

### 4. Check in

- Pop a reminder in your calendar to call them in a couple of weeks. If they’re really struggling, follow up with them sooner
- You could say: “I’ve been thinking of you and wanted to know how you’ve been going since we last chatted”
- Ask if they’ve found a better way to manage the situation. If they haven’t done anything, don’t judge them. They might just need someone to listen to them for the moment
- Stay in touch and be there for them. Genuine care and concern can make a real difference

# Ways Small Business Owners can Provide Support to staff

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As a small business owner, you'll know the highs and lows of running your own company. While it can be incredibly rewarding, both mentally and financially, stress and challenges are not withstanding.

As an employer, you can face a range of unique challenges that can affect your mental health and the mental health of your staff.

It's fair to say it has been testing with COVID-19 adversely affecting the majority of people and industries. If it's taught us anything though, it's that fostering a healthy work environment is beneficial to everyone. And everyone across the organisation, no matter how big or small, has a role to play.

Small businesses are often family-like in nature, especially in smaller working environments such as retail and salons, so it's only natural to become close with staff. That in turn can see you in a position to recognise when someone isn't being themselves.

## Supporting your team supports your business.

When someone in your team is struggling, it is normal to worry about the impacts it will have on your business, but by supporting your staff first, you will also support your business in the long-term.

- It demonstrates that you value your staff and their wellbeing
- If you support someone during a hard time, it will promote a sense of loyalty to your business
- It will create a more open and inviting work place
- It will encourage others to speak up if they are struggling

## Potential signs someone isn't OK.

- Unmotivated or moody
- Coming in late or taking days off regularly
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Being withdrawn and/or not engaging in conversation

There are myriad reasons someone may display one or more of the above signs, and while it may be something small or short term, having a conversation and letting them know they are supported can make a big difference.

If someone in your team is struggling, you may be able to make small changes in their job that assists them to get well and stay well.

In some industries, such as building and construction, where there has long been an unfortunate stigma around staying tough and not opening up about mental health, consider turning to the likes of Mates in Construction. Mates has trained more than 180,000 workers as part of their program which develops life-saving skills to recognise when a co-worker may be doing it tough, and how to step in.



# What to do if someone says they're not OK

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Starting a conversation with someone in your team you are concerned about is a great starting point to demonstrate that they are supported and encourage them to open up. If they are OK, they'll know you're someone who cares enough to ask. But what if they're not OK?

You need to prepare yourself for that possibility. If they don't want to speak about it, respect their choice, but leave the door open for further dialogue. If they do want to talk about it, there are some things you can do to encourage a meaningful conversation.

## Be patient and listen.

Be patient and make your staff member feel comfortable to open up in their own time. Book out ample time in your calendar to ensure your conversation is not cut short or they feel under pressure. Ask them if they would like to talk about things and listen to what they have to say without interrupting.

## Be empathetic.

Be kind and empathetic, without making any judgments. A simple, 'I'm sorry to hear that' is a good initial response. Let them know that you care and that their mental wellbeing is important to you.

## Ask questions.

Focus on asking questions rather than trying to provide solutions. Everyone deals with things in their own way and what may have worked for you or someone you know will not necessarily work for your employee.

Ask questions around whether there is anything you can do – from a work perspective – to help alleviate stress or anxiety. Some good starting points include:

- How can I help?
- Is there anything I can do for you right now?

You might be able to make changes to their role or working environment to enable them to fulfill their work

duties while they are going through a difficult time.

If you are in a position and industry where remote working is feasible, provide the option, especially if coming into the office or job site is adding to their stresses.

If your business provides a service, such as health and beauty or electrical needs, think about ways your employee can share their expertise on your online platforms, such as blogs or social media posts. A change may be just the thing to boost their motivation and encourage new skills.

## Offer support.

Ask whether they have access to professional support. Offer to help them find it if they do not, as help is available to everyone, regardless of their financial situation.

## Follow up.

Let your employee know that you are there to offer continual support and check in with them over a walk or coffee in the coming weeks.

## Resources

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If you or someone you know is struggling there are a number of Australian professionals and crisis lines that can be contacted:

### **BEYOND BLUE** 1300 224 636

Works to raise awareness of depression, anxiety and suicide prevention, reduce the stigma surrounding these issues and to encourage people to seek support when they need it.

### **BLACK DOG INSTITUTE**

Information on symptoms, treatment and prevention of depression and bipolar disorder.

### **BUTTERFLY NATIONAL HELPLINE** 1800 334 673 (1800 ED HOPE)

The service is available to people with eating disorders, their carers and loved ones, and any professionals who need some assistance in knowing what to do next with a patient (note: this is general advice and not formal clinical consultation).

### **CARERS AUSTRALIA** 1800 242 636

Short-term counselling and emotional and psychological support services for carers and their families in each state and territory.

### **HEADSPACE** 1800 650 890

Free online and telephone service that supports young people aged between 12 and 25 and their families going through a tough time.

### **KIDS HELPLINE** 1800 551 800

A free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

### **MENSLINE AUSTRALIA** 1300 789 978

A telephone and online support, information and referral service, helping men to deal with relationship problems in a practical and effective way.

### **HEAD TO HEALTH**

An innovative website that can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

### **MINDSPOT CLINIC** 1800 614 434

An online and telephone clinic providing free assessment and treatment services for Australian adults with anxiety or depression.

### **NATIONAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED HEALTH ORGANISATION (NACCHO)**

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and Aboriginal Medical Services in each state and territory.

### **RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA** 1300 364 277

A provider of relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.

### **SANE AUSTRALIA** 1800 18 7263

Information about mental illness, treatments, where to go for support and help carers.



**1800KINAWAY**